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PHILIP PULLMAN

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Philip Pullman's
Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm

THE GOLDEN KEY

AND OTHER FAIRY TALES FROM THE

BROTHERS GRIMM

VIKING

THE GOLDEN KEY

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PENGUIN BOOKS
Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008 Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books, Rosebank Office Park, 181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North 2193, South Africa
Penguin China, B7 Jaiming Center, 27 East Third Ring Road North, Chaoyang District, Beijing 100020, China

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:
80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in Penguin Books 2012

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ISBN 978-1-101-61807-3

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THE GOLDEN KEY

THE TWELVE HUNTSMEN

Once there was a prince who was betrothed to a princess whom he loved dearly. One day, as they were sitting together happily, a message came to say that his father was very ill, and wanted to see him before he died.

The prince said to his beloved, ‘My dear, I’ll have to go and leave you for a while. Keep this ring to remember me by, and when I’m king I’ll come back and take you home with me.’

Then he rode away, and when he reached his father’s palace, he found the king mortally ill: at the point of death in fact.

The king said to him, ‘My dearest boy, I wanted to see you one more time before I die. And I want you to make a promise.’

‘Anything, father!’

‘Promise me to marry the princess I choose.’ And he named the daughter of a different king.

The prince was so grief-stricken that he didn’t think, but said, ‘Of course, father, I’ll do whatever you want.’

Satisfied, the king closed his eyes and died.

His son was proclaimed king, and when the period of mourning was over, he was crowned; and then he remembered the promise he’d given his father. He sent ambassadors to the court of the other king and asked for the princess’s hand in marriage, and after a short negotiation they became betrothed.

Naturally, news of this spread far and wide, and it wasn’t long before his first fiancée heard about it. She was shocked by his infidelity, so much so that she nearly pined away.

‘My darling, what’s troubling you?’ her father said. ‘Is there anything I can get to make you happier? Just name it, and you shall have it.’

So she thought, and then said, ‘Father, what I want most is eleven girls as much like me as possible.’

The king said, ‘I’ll get it done at once.’

So he sent messengers to every corner of his kingdom to look for girls who resembled her. Many were found and brought to the palace, and the princess chose those who looked most like her, though there were few who were very like. Having chosen eleven of them, she ordered eleven huntsmen’s costumes to be made for them, and one more for her.

Once all twelve girls were ready, the princess said farewell to her father, and they rode away to the court of her faithless fiancé, whom she still loved even so. There she asked if he needed any huntsmen.

‘My companions and I are skilled at that kind of work,’ she said. ‘You couldn’t do better than take all twelve of us.’

The king looked at the princess without recognizing her. The twelve of them were all so good-looking in their hunting dress, though, that he said he’d take them on; so they were all engaged in his service, and were known as the King’s Huntsmen.

Now the king happened to have a marvellous lion, far more intelligent than any lion at the court of any other king; and cleverer than many humans, in fact, for he knew all kinds of secret things that were hidden from common knowledge. One day the lion spoke to the king and said, ‘Those twelve huntsmen of yours . . .’

‘Splendid-looking fellows, aren’t they?’ said the king.

‘So they may be. But they’re not huntsmen. In fact they’re not men at all. They’re girls.’

‘No! I don’t believe it.’

‘I’m afraid it’s true.’

‘Prove it!’

‘Very well,’ said the lion. ‘Get some dried peas and scatter them over the floor of your antechamber. If they’re men, they’ll walk over them with a firm step; but if they’re girls, they’ll go on tiptoe and skitter and shuffle them out of the way. You watch – see if I’m wrong.’

‘That’s a good idea,’ said the king, and did exactly as the lion advised.

However, one of the king’s servants had conceived a great liking for the twelve huntsmen, and hearing that they were going to be tested in that way, he went and told them.

‘Thank you!’ said the princess, then told her eleven companions: ‘Now remember, when we go into the antechamber we must walk straight over the peas as if they weren’t there.’

And next morning, when the king summoned the huntsmen, they walked right over the peas like the manliest of men and not a pea rolled out of place.

After they’d been dismissed, the king called the lion.

‘Fine adviser you are!’ he said. ‘They walked exactly like men, every one of them.’

‘They must have known they were going to be tested,’ said the lion. ‘I’ve got a better idea, though. This time, have twelve spinning wheels put in the antechamber. The thing about girls and women is that they can disguise their way of walking, but they can’t conceal what they really feel, and they all love spinning wheels. When they see these, they’ll go up and admire them and try them out. Mark my words, they won’t be able to resist.’

‘Ah,’ said the king, ‘I like that. Yes, that’s very ingenious. Well done, lion.’

He had the spinning wheels set up in the antechamber, and once again the servant who liked the huntsmen told them what the lion had advised.

‘Hear that, huntsmen?’ said the princess to her companions. ‘When you see the spinning wheels, just ignore them. A cursory glance, and no more.’

And next morning the huntsmen strode through the antechamber without so much as a peep at the spinning wheels. The king was baffled, and sent for the lion.

‘I’m fed up with your advice,’ he said. ‘It’s not worth listening to.’

‘But they must have known!’ said the lion. ‘Someone gave the plan away.’

‘Oh, rubbish,’ said the king. ‘Get back to the zoo.’

Having discarded the lion’s advice, the king continued to hunt with his twelve huntsmen, and the longer they spent together, the more fond he became of them. Now one day when they were out hunting, a messenger came galloping up to the king to say that his intended bride was on her way. The true fiancée heard this, and her heart convulsed in her breast and she fell to the ground in a faint.

Thinking that his favourite servant had had an accident, the king rushed over and pulled off the fellow's glove in order to feel his pulse; and there was the ring he'd given his beloved to remember him by. He looked at the huntsman's face with astonishment, and recognized it at once.

Helplessly he kissed the princess, and when she opened her eyes he said, 'You are mine and I am yours. Nothing and no one can change that.'

He sent the messenger back to tell the other princess to return to her kingdom, for, as he said, he already had a bride, and having found an old key, he didn't need a new one.

So their wedding was celebrated with great joy, and the lion was restored to favour, because after all he'd been right about the huntsmen, even if his advice had not succeeded in revealing their secret.

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Source: a story told to the Grimm brothers by Jeanette Hassenpflug
Similar stories: Italo Calvino: 'The King of Portugal's Son' (*Italian Folktales*); Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, 'The True Bride' (*Children's and Household Tales*)

This is not the only prince in Grimm who seems surprisingly forgetful about the beautiful girl he's promised to marry. Whether this was a common problem among princes is not easy to say. He's lucky to have a lion as his advisor, or he would be if the lion's advice weren't so idiotic. This is one of those stories in which the individual elements (the twelve pretty huntsmen, the talking lion) are more memorable than the course of the story, and in which the happy ending comes about by sheer accident. Now, if the lion had only managed to give some good advice instead of the bumbling fatuity of an elderly club bore, the prince might have found his true bride much sooner.

THE BUFFALO-HIDE BOOTS

No danger can discourage a brave soldier, but the fire of the enemy is not everything a soldier has to face. Once there were two brothers, the sons of a peasant. The older joined the army, fought well, and had the good fortune to find his period of service coinciding with several victories in battle. He soon became a general.

His younger brother, however, who joined up a year or two later, was no less brave, but not so lucky. The wars were over and there was nothing for an honest trooper to do but carry out his sentry duty and march up and down looking smart; but as smart as he looked, there was no chance of promotion for him.

One day the soldier was detailed to stand guard outside the general's quarters while the general was giving a banquet. One of the guests going in was so struck by the disconsolate expression on the soldier's face that he stopped and said, 'What's the matter, young fellow?'

'It's my brother,' said the soldier. 'He's the general, but he takes no notice of me at all. It's as if he's forgotten I even exist.'

The guest went inside and told the general.

'Don't believe the wretch!' the general said. 'He's lying, and I'll have him lashed.'

The soldier was given a hundred lashes. But there was an old sergeant who felt sorry for him, and when he'd recovered from the lashing the sergeant said to him, 'Look here, I'm going to teach you a trick. It's a good 'un, and I haven't told it to anyone else. You never know, you might need it some day.'

So he taught the young man his trick, and soon afterwards, seeing that this was the only benefit his army service was ever going to bring him, the

soldier took his discharge papers and went his way. He had nothing but a woollen cloak and a pair of buffalo-hide boots, and as he'd never learned a trade, he found it hard going.

One day as he was wandering through the forest he came upon a man dressed in a smart green hunting costume and a pair of glossy boots. The hunter was sitting on a felled tree looking perplexed.

'Fine pair of boots,' said the soldier. 'Must have taken you a fair time to shine 'em up as glossy as that. These old buffalo-hide boots of mine could never take a polish, but they've seen me through thick and thin, and there's years of wear in 'em yet. Where are you off to, mate?'

'I have to admit I'm lost,' said the hunter. 'D'you know where this road leads?'

'Every road leads to a town in the end,' said the soldier. 'That's all I know. What d'you say to joining up and going along together?'

'I don't mind if we do,' said the hunter, and off they went together.

They hadn't walked far before night began to fall.

'Well, we're still in the woods,' said the soldier, 'but look, there's a light shining over there. Let's go and see if they'll give us a bite to eat.'

They came to a crumbling old stone house and knocked on the door. An elderly woman opened it and said, 'What do you want?'

'Here's two honest men,' said the soldier, 'and we're tired and we're hungry. Can you give us something to eat and somewhere to lie down for the night?'

'Oh, no,' she said, 'not here I can't. This house belongs to a band of robbers, and if you know what's good for you, you'll scarper before they get home. If they find you here they'll do you in.'

'Frankly,' said the soldier, 'it's all the same to me whether I die of hunger in the forest or from a robber's dagger in the heart. I've gone two days without food already and my stomach can't wait a moment longer. You're a kind-looking lady – have mercy on an old soldier and his mate.'

'Oh, well, I suppose . . .' she said.

The hunter wasn't keen on going in, but the soldier pulled his sleeve. 'Come on,' he said, 'we'll have time to swallow something before they finish us off.'

'I can hear 'em coming,' said the old woman. 'Quick! Get behind the stove. I'll slip you any leftovers.'

The soldier and the hunter had only just crawled behind the stove when twelve robbers came in. They were big fierce-looking men, bristling with weapons, and they sat down at once and banged the table for their supper. The old woman carried in a huge joint of roast beef, and the chief robber carved it up with his sword and handed it round, and they all fell to eating at once. It smelled so good that the soldier couldn't wait.

'I can't stand it,' he whispered to the hunter. 'I'm going to join them at the table.'

'You'll get us both killed!'

'No, you leave it to me.'

And he clambered out from behind the stove and said, 'Evening, all.'

The robbers were astounded.

'What are you doing here?' roared the chief.

'He's spying on us!' cried another.

'Hang him up and cut bits off him,' suggested a third.

'Mind your manners,' said the soldier. 'Don't you know you should never kill a hungry man? Move up there and let me sit down.'

The robbers had never seen anything like it. The chief was impressed by the soldier's coolness, though, and said, 'All right, you come and sit down. You can have some roast beef. When you've had your supper, though, that's it. We'll make you wish you'd kept away and stayed hungry.'

'All in good time,' said the soldier, and helped himself to a large slice of meat. 'Hey, Shiny Boots!' he called. 'Come and join us. You must be as hungry as I am, and I don't care where you come from, you won't find a better roast than this.'

The hunter came out from behind the stove, and the robbers cried, 'There's another one!'

'Make yourself at home, why don't you?' said the robber chief. 'Come and sit down. Join your pal. All the more fun for us later on.'

'No, I'm not hungry, thank you,' said the hunter.

The robbers watched the soldier sharing their food, and their amazement grew as he sat there so calmly finishing his slice of beef and helping himself to another.

'Food's good,' he said with his mouth full, 'but I could do with a drink. Pass the bottle. Oh, look at that, it's empty. What a shame.'

The robber captain was enjoying the spectacle. He said to the old woman, ‘Go down to the cellar, and fetch up a bottle of the best.’

When the wine arrived, the soldier pulled the cork with a loud *pop* and said quietly to the hunter, ‘Now watch. I bet you’ve never seen this before.’

He stood up and held the bottle high, took a deep swig, and then waved it over the robbers’ heads and said, ‘Here’s to your health! Raise your right hands and open your mouths, all at once, *now*.’

To the hunter’s amazement, all the robbers did exactly that. They raised their right hands and opened their mouths, and then they stuck fast just like that. They couldn’t move an inch. They were just like stone statues.

‘Good God!’ said the hunter. ‘How did that happen?’

‘Animal magnetism,’ the soldier explained. ‘It’s a little trick I learned in the army.’

‘That’s astounding,’ said the hunter. ‘But look, hadn’t we better make our escape?’

‘Not while there’s still food on the table. I haven’t seen such a feast as this for months. Come on, sit down, eat your fill. These little birds won’t move till I tell ’em to.’

The old woman brought them another bottle of the best, and a fine apple tart, what’s more, and a jug of cream. The soldier didn’t get up till he’d eaten enough for three.

Finally he sighed and pushed his chair back and said, ‘Time to strike tents. It’s not far to town – the old woman’ll show us the way.’

When they got to the town, the soldier sought out the barracks at once and told the officer in charge about the robbers.

‘Come back with me,’ he said to the hunter. ‘I want to see their faces when they wake up.’

The soldiers surrounded the robbers, who were still sitting animal-magnetized at the table.

‘I’ll need another bottle,’ the soldier said to the old woman. ‘One of the best.’

As soon as he’d drawn the cork and taken a swig, he waved it over the robbers’ heads and called out, ‘Good health to you!’

Instantly the robbers woke up and began to move, but before they could draw their weapons, the soldiers had overpowered them. They tied them hand and foot and threw them into a cart.

‘To prison with the lot of ’em,’ said the soldier.

While he put the cork back in the bottle and stowed it in his knapsack, the hunter took one of the soldiers aside and spoke to him quietly. The man galloped ahead of the others back to town.

‘Well, Shiny Boots,’ said the soldier, ‘that was a good day’s work, eh? We’ve beaten the enemy and had a fine meal. Now let’s bring up the rear as these gallows-birds trundle into town.’

When they reached the town gate, they found a big crowd all cheering and waving flags, and then the royal bodyguard rode up, saluting and presenting arms.

‘What’s going on?’ said the soldier, amazed.

‘The king’s been away,’ said the hunter, ‘and he’s returning to his palace. It’s only right for him to have a welcome like this.’

‘Where’s the king?’ said the soldier, looking all around. ‘I can’t see him.’

‘Here I am,’ said the hunter, and opened his hunting coat to show the royal insignia on his waistcoat. ‘I sent word ahead that I was coming.’

The soldier fell to his knees.

‘Oh, blimey, your majesty,’ he said, ‘forgive me! I shouldn’t have called you Shiny Boots. In fact I should have treated you a lot more proper than what I did.’

But the king gave him his hand and said, ‘You’re a good soldier, and you saved my life. I’m going to make sure you have the best of treatment from now on.’

And when he heard about how the soldier’s brother had had him lashed, he ordered the general demoted to private and offered to make the soldier a general in his place.

‘That’s very kind of you, your majesty,’ the soldier said, ‘but I don’t think I’m cut out to be a general. A life of leisure would suit me best.’

‘Then that is what you shall have,’ said the king. ‘And if you ever want a meal, just come to the door of the royal kitchen and there’ll always be a slice of beef for you. But if you want to drink anyone’s health, you’ll have to ask my permission first.’

***

Source: a story in Friedmund von Arnim's *Hundert Märchen im Gebirge gesammelt* (*Hundred Tales from the Mountains*; 1844)
Similar stories: Alexander Afanasyev: 'The Soldier and the King' (*Russian Fairy Tales*)

Here the 'magic' is brought about by hypnotism or, as it would probably have been called in those days, mesmerism, after the German physician Franz Mesmer (1734–1815). Grimm (or their source, Friedmund von Arnim) provides no explanation for how the soldier acquired this mesmeric skill, so I put one in. No doubt hypnotism, as a fashionable and intriguing phenomenon, was familiar to the Grimms' readers, just as the feats of Derren Brown are to a television audience today; and anyway, it's funny.

Hypnotism turns up in another Grimm tale, 'The Chicken Beam', in which a magician tricks a crowd into thinking that a chicken is carrying a heavy beam when all it has in its beak is a straw. The comic-book character Mandrake the Magician, who began his crime-busting career in 1934, persuaded criminals, mad scientists and other undesirables that they had been turned to stone by 'gesturing hypnotically'. I tried it when I was a small boy, and it doesn't work.

The idea of the brother who became a general comes from Afanasyev's story, which is a tight and well-shaped narrative, but it has no hypnotism. Instead, the soldier cuts the robbers' heads off one by one, and wallops the king for falling asleep on guard.

THE GOLDEN KEY

One winter's day, when the snow lay deep on the ground, a poor boy was sent to the forest to bring back firewood. He gathered some fallen branches and loaded them on his sled, but after doing that, he was so cold that he thought he'd make himself a fire right away and warm himself up a bit before going home.

He cleared a space to build the fire, and as he brushed the snow away he found a little golden key.

'Where there's a key,' he said to himself, 'there must be a lock nearby.'

So he dug into the ground, and a little way under the surface he found an iron box. He dug all around it and with a struggle he pulled it up out of the frozen earth, thinking, 'There must be some treasure in here. I hope the key fits!'

At first he couldn't find the keyhole, but it was a very small key, after all. Finally he found the hole, so small he could hardly see it. He took the key in his frozen fingers, and he could hardly hold it. He put the key in the hole and started to turn – and now we'll have to wait till he turns it all the way and opens the lid. Then we'll know what marvellous things the box contains.

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Source: a story told to the Grimm brothers by Marie Hassenpflug

This is one of a number of formula stories that are never quite finished. Many of them concern a shepherd who has to get his very large flock of sheep across a very small bridge one at a time: 'So he took the first one across, and then he took the second one across, and then he took the third one across . . .' Or it might be an ant filling a barn with corn: 'He carried the first grain in, and then . . .'

Another way of setting up such a story is with the famous opening sentence: ‘It was a dark and stormy night’. In this variation, someone is telling a story in which someone is telling a story in which – and so on.

‘The Golden Key’ depends not on repetition but on terminating before the terminus, so to speak. This is the pattern followed by a number of annoying novels or films or plays in which, for instance, the outcome depends on a letter saying whether X has got a university place or not, or the result of a pregnancy test, or the verdict of a jury. The postman arrives at the door; the heroine begins to open her hand to disclose the colour of the test result; the jury returns to the courtroom – and then: THE END.

Which raises the suspicion that the author just doesn’t know how to end the story. It’s cheating.

In this case, though, the set-up is a little more interesting. From the Grimms’ second edition of 1819 onwards, this tale was always placed last, suggesting perhaps that there are more marvellous tales yet to be discovered. Given the treasures they have already disclosed in their great collection, I’m willing to take that on trust.

‘The Golden Key’ is also the name of a literary fairy tale from a collection published in 1867 by George MacDonald (1824–1905), which is much better than most specimens of that genre. It, too, ends without ending. Mossy and Tangle are searching for the land whence the shadows fall: ‘And by this time I think they must have got there.’

Read on for a sneak peek at two stories from Philip Pullman's

FAIRY TALES FROM THE BROTHERS GRIMM

A NEW ENGLISH VERSION

Coming from Viking in November 2012

PHILIP PULLMAN

FAIRY TALES FROM THE BROTHERS GRIMM

A NEW ENGLISH VERSION

THE GOOSE GIRL AT THE SPRING

Once upon a time there was a very old woman who lived with her flock of geese in a lonely place among the mountains, where her little house lay surrounded by a deep forest. Every morning she took her crutch and hobbled off into the woods, where she kept herself busy gathering grass for her geese and picking any wild fruit she could reach. She put it all on her back and carried it home. If she met anyone on the path, she would always greet them in a friendly way, saying, ‘Good day, neighbour! Nice weather! Yes, it’s grass I’ve got here, as much as I can carry; we poor people all have to bear our burdens.’

But for some reason people didn’t like meeting her. When they saw her coming, they’d often take a different path, and if a father and his little boy came across her, the father would whisper, ‘Beware of that old woman. She’s a crafty one. It wouldn’t surprise me if she was a witch.’

One morning a good-looking young man happened to be walking through the forest. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, a fresh breeze stirred the leaves, and he was feeling happy and cheerful. He hadn’t seen anyone else that morning, but suddenly he came across the old witch kneeling on the ground cutting grass with a sickle. There was already a big load of grass neatly cut, and beside it two baskets filled with wild apples and pears.

‘Good grief, my dear old woman,’ he said, ‘you can’t be intending to carry all that!’

‘Oh, yes, I must, sir,’ she said. ‘Rich people don’t have to do that sort of thing, but we poor folk have a saying: “Don’t look back, you’ll only see how bent you are.” Would you be able to help me, I wonder, sir? You’ve got

a fine straight back and a strong pair of legs. I'm sure you could manage it easily. It's not far to go, my little house, just out of sight over that way.'

The young man felt sorry for her, and said, 'Well, I'm one of those rich people, I have to confess – my father's a nobleman – but I'm happy to show you that farmers aren't the only people who can carry things. Yes, I'll take the bundle to your house for you.'

'That's very good of you, sir,' she said. 'It might take an hour's walking, but I'm sure you won't mind that. You could carry the apples and pears for me too.'

The young count began to have second thoughts when she mentioned an hour's walk, but she was so quick to take up his offer that he couldn't back out of it. She wrapped the grass up in a cloth and tied it on to his back and then put the baskets into his hands.

'You see,' she said, 'not much really.'

'But it's actually quite heavy,' said the young man. 'This grass – is it grass? It feels like bricks! And the fruit might as well be blocks of stone. I can hardly breathe!'

He would have liked to put it all down, but he didn't want to face the old woman's mockery. She was already teasing him cruelly.

'Look at the fine young gentleman,' she said, 'making such a fuss about what a poor old woman has to carry every day! You're good with words, aren't you? "Farmers aren't the only people who can carry things!" But when it comes to deeds, you fall at the first hurdle. Come on! What are you standing around for? Get a move on! Nobody's going to do it for you.'

While he walked on level ground he could just about bear the weight, but as soon as the path began to slope upwards his feet rolled on the stones, which slipped out as if they were alive, and he could barely move. Beads of sweat appeared on his face and trickled hot and cold down his back.

'I can't go any further,' he gasped. 'I've got to stop and rest.'

'Oh, no, you don't,' said the old woman. 'You can stop and rest when we've got there, but till then you keep walking. You never know – it might bring you luck.'

'Oh, this is too much,' said the count. 'This is outrageous!'

He tried to throw off the bundle, but he just couldn't dislodge it. It clung to his back as if it were growing there. He squirmed and twisted this way

and that, and the old woman laughed at him and jumped up and down with her crutch.

‘No point in losing your temper, young sir,’ she said. ‘You’re as red in the face as a turkey cock. Carry your burden patiently, and when we get home, I might give you a tip.’

What could he do? He had to stumble on after the old woman as well as he could. The odd thing was that while his load seemed to be getting heavier and heavier, she seemed to be getting more and more nimble.

Then all of a sudden she gave a skip and landed right on top of the pack on his back and stayed there. She was as thin as a stick, but she weighed more than the stoutest peasant girl. The young man’s legs wobbled, all his muscles trembled with effort and blazed with pain, and whenever he tried to stop for a moment, the old woman lashed him with a bunch of stinging nettles. He groaned, he sobbed, he struggled on, and when he was sure he was going to collapse, they turned a corner in the path and there was the old woman’s house.

When the geese saw her, they stretched out their necks and their wings and ran towards her, cackling. After them came another old woman, carrying a stick. This one wasn’t as old as the first one, but she was big and strong with a heavy, dull, ugly face.

‘Where’ve you been, mother?’ she said to the old woman. ‘You’ve been gone so long I thought something must have happened to you.’

‘Oh, no, my pretty one,’ said the old woman. ‘I met this kind gentleman and he offered to carry my bundle for me. And look, he even offered to take me on his back when I got tired. We had such a nice conversation that the journey passed in no time.’

Finally the old woman slid off the young count’s back and took the bundle and the baskets.

‘There we are, sir,’ she said, ‘you sit yourself down and have a breather. You’ve earned your little reward, and you shall have it. As for you, my beautiful treasure,’ she said to the other woman, ‘you better go inside. It wouldn’t be proper for you to stay alone with a lusty young fellow like this. I know what young men are like. He might fall in love with you.’

The count didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry; even if she were thirty years younger, he thought, this treasure would never prompt a flicker in his heart.

The old woman fussed over her geese as if they were children before going inside after her daughter. The young man stretched himself out on a bench under an apple tree. It was a beautiful morning; the sun shone warmly, the air was mild, and all around him stretched a green meadow covered with cowslips and wild thyme and a thousand other flowers. A clear stream twinkled in the sunlight as it ran through the middle of the meadow, and the white geese waddled here and there or paddled in the stream.

‘What a lovely place,’ the young man thought. ‘But I’m so tired I can’t keep my eyes open. I think I’ll take a nap for a few minutes. I just hope the wind doesn’t blow my legs away; they’re as weak as tinder.’

The next thing he knew, the old woman was shaking his arm.

‘Wakey wakey,’ she said, ‘you can’t stay here. I admit I gave you a hard time, but you’re still alive, and here’s your reward. I said I’d give you something, didn’t I? You don’t need money or land, so here’s something else. Look after it well and it’ll bring you luck.’

What she gave him was a little box carved out of a single emerald. The count jumped up, feeling refreshed by his sleep, and thanked her for the gift. Then he set out on his way without once looking back for the beautiful treasure. For a long way down the path he could still hear the happy noise of the geese.

He wandered in the forest for at least three days before he found his way out. Eventually he came to a large city, where the custom was that every stranger had to be brought before the king and queen; so he was taken to the palace, where the king and queen were sitting on their thrones.

The young count knelt politely, and since he had nothing else to offer, he took the emerald box from his pocket, opened it and set it down before the queen. She beckoned to him to bring the box closer so that she could look inside it, but no sooner had she seen what was there than she fell into a dead faint. The bodyguards seized the young man at once and were about to drag him off to prison when the queen opened her eyes.

‘Release him!’ she cried. ‘Everyone must leave the throne room. I want to speak to this young man in private.’

When they were alone, the queen began to cry bitterly.

‘What use is all the splendour of this palace?’ she said. ‘Every morning when I wake up, sorrow rushes in on me like a flood. I once had three

daughters, and the third was so beautiful that everyone thought she was a miracle. She was as white as snow and as pink as apple blossoms, and her hair shone like the beams of the sun. When she wept, it wasn't tears that flowed down her cheeks but pearls and precious stones.

'On her fifteenth birthday, the king called all three daughters to his throne. You can't imagine how everyone blinked when the third daughter came in – it was just as if the sun had come out.

'The king said, "My daughters, since I don't know when my last day will arrive, I'm going to decide today what each of you shall receive after my death. You all love me, but whoever loves me most shall have the largest part of the kingdom."

'Each of the girls said she loved him most of all, but he wanted more than that.

'"Tell me exactly how much you love me," he said. "Then I'll know just what you mean."

'The oldest daughter said, "I love you as much as the sweetest sugar." The second daughter said, "I love you as much as I love my prettiest dress."

'But the third daughter didn't say a word. So her father said, "And you, darling, how much do you love me?"

'And she said, "I don't know. I can't compare my love with anything."

'But he kept on and on demanding an answer until she found something to compare her love to, and she said, "No matter how good the food, it won't taste of anything without salt. So I love my father as much as I love salt."

'When the king heard this, he became furious and said, "If that's how you love me, then that's how your love will be rewarded."

'And he divided his kingdom between the two eldest daughters, and he ordered the youngest to have a sack of salt bound to her back, and then two servants were to lead her out into the depths of the forest. We all begged and pleaded for mercy, but he wouldn't change his mind. Oh, how she wept when she was forced to leave! The path she'd trodden was covered with pearls. Not long afterwards, the king regretted what he'd done, and had the forest searched from end to end; but she was never found.

'When I think that wild animals may have eaten her, I can hardly bear the pain. Sometimes I comfort myself by thinking that she's found shelter in a cave, or she's being looked after by kind people, but . . .

‘So you can imagine the shock when I opened the emerald box and saw a pearl just like the ones my daughter wept. And you can imagine how my heart was stirred. And now you must tell me: where did you get this? How does it come to be in your possession?’

The young count told her how it had been given to him by the old woman in the forest, who he believed must be a witch, because everything about her had made him feel uneasy. However, he said, this was the first he had heard about the queen’s daughter. Accordingly, the king and queen decided to set out at once to find the old woman, in the hope that she might be able to give them some news about their child.

That evening the old woman was sitting in her little house, spinning with her spinning wheel. Night was falling, and the only light came from a pine log burning on the hearth. Suddenly there were loud cries from outside, as the geese came home from their pasture, and a moment later the daughter entered the house, but the old woman merely nodded and didn’t say a word.

Her daughter sat down beside her and took up her own spinning, twisting the thread as deftly as any young girl. The two of them sat together for two hours without exchanging a word.

Finally there came a rustling from the window, and they looked up to see two fiery red eyes glaring in at them. It was an old owl, who cried out, ‘*Tu-whoo, tu-whoo,*’ three times.

The old woman said, ‘Well, my little daughter, it’s time for you to go outside and do your work.’

The daughter stood up. Where did she go? Out across the meadow, and down towards the valley, until she came to three old oak trees next to a spring. The moon was full, and had just risen over the mountain; it was so bright that you could have found a pin on the ground.

The daughter unfastened the skin at her neck, and pulled her face right over her head before kneeling down at the spring and washing herself. When she’d done that, she dipped the skin of her false face in the water, wrung it out, and laid it to dry and bleach on the grass. But what a change had come over her! You wouldn’t believe it! After the dull heavy face and the grey wig had come off, her hair flowed down like liquid sunlight. Her eyes sparkled like stars, and her cheeks were as pink as the freshest apple blossom.

But this girl, so beautiful, was sad. She sat down by the spring and cried bitterly. Tear after tear rolled down her long hair and fell into the grass. There she sat, and she would have stayed there for a long time if she hadn't heard a rustling among the branches of a tree nearby. Like a deer startled by the sound of a hunter's rifle, she jumped up at once. At the same time a dark cloud passed over the face of the moon, and in the sudden darkness the maiden slipped into the old skin and vanished like a candle flame blown out by the wind.

Shivering like an aspen leaf, she ran back to the little house, where the old woman was standing by the door.

'Oh, mother, I—'

'Hush, dear,' said the old woman gently, 'I know, I know.'

She led the girl into the room and put another log on the fire. But she didn't go back to the spinning wheel; she took a broom and began to sweep the floor.

'We must make everything neat and clean,' she said.

'But, mother, what are you doing it now for? It's late! What's happening?'

'Don't you know what time it is?'

'It's not past midnight,' said the girl, 'but it must be past eleven.'

'And don't you remember that it was three years ago today when you came to me? Time's up, my dear. We can't stay together any longer.'

The girl was frightened. 'Oh, mother dear,' she said, 'you're not really going to throw me out, are you? Where shall I go? I've got no friends, I've got no home to go to. I've done everything you've asked of me, you've always been satisfied with my work – please don't send me away!'

But the old woman wouldn't give her an answer. 'My own time here is up,' she said. 'But before I leave, the house must be spick and span. So don't get in my way, and don't worry too much either. You'll find a roof to shelter you, and you'll be quite satisfied with the wages I'm going to give you.'

'But please tell me, what's happening?'

'I've told you once, and I'm telling you again: don't interrupt my work. Go to your room, take the skin off your face, and put on the silk dress you were wearing when you first came here. Then wait there till I call you.'

Meanwhile, the king and queen were continuing their search for the old woman who had given the count the emerald box. He had gone with them, but he'd become separated from them in the thick forest, and he'd had to go on alone. He thought he'd found the right path, but then as the daylight waned he thought he'd better not go any further in case he got really lost; so he climbed a tree, meaning to spend the night safely up among the branches.

But when the moon came out he saw something moving down the meadow, and in its brilliant light he realized it was the goose girl he'd seen before at the old woman's house. She was coming towards the trees, and he thought, 'Aha! If I catch one of these witches, I'll soon have my hands on the other.'

But then she stopped at the spring, and removed her skin, and the count nearly fell out of the tree with astonishment; and when her golden hair fell down around her shoulders, and he saw her clearly in the moonlight, he knew that she was more beautiful than anyone he had ever seen. He hardly dared to breathe. But he couldn't resist leaning forward to get a little closer, and in doing so he leaned too heavily on a dry branch, and it was the sound of it cracking that startled her. She leaped up at once and put on the other skin, and then the cloud passed in front of the moon; and in the sudden darkness she slipped away.

The count climbed down from the tree at once and ran after her. He hadn't gone very far up the meadow when he saw two figures making for the house. It was the king and queen, who'd seen the firelight in the window, and when the count caught up with them and told them about the miracle he'd seen at the spring, they were sure the girl must be their daughter.

Full of joy and hope, they hurried on and soon arrived at the little house. The geese were all asleep with their heads tucked under their wings, and not one of them moved. The three searchers looked in at the window, and saw the old woman quietly sitting and spinning, nodding her head as she turned the wheel. Everything in the room was as clean as if the little fog men lived there, who carry no dust on their feet; but there was no sign of the princess.

For a minute or two the king and queen just looked in, but then they plucked up their courage and knocked at the window.

The old woman seemed to be expecting them. She stood up and called out in a friendly voice, ‘Come in. I know who you are.’

When they were all inside the house, the old woman said, ‘You could have spared yourself this sorrow and this journey, you know, if you hadn’t banished your daughter so unjustly three years ago. But she hasn’t come to harm. She’s tended the geese for three years, and made a good job of it. She’s learned nothing evil and she’s kept a pure heart. But I think you’ve been punished enough by the unhappiness you’ve suffered.’

Then she went to the door and said, ‘Come out, my little daughter.’

The door opened, and the princess came into the room, wearing her silken dress, with her golden hair shining and her bright eyes sparkling. It was as if an angel had come down from heaven.

The princess went straight to her mother and father and embraced them both, and kissed them. Both of them wept for joy; they couldn’t help it. The young count was standing nearby, and when she caught sight of him her cheeks became as red as a moss rose, and she herself didn’t know why.

The king said, ‘My dear child, I gave my kingdom away. What can I give you?’

‘She needs nothing,’ said the old woman. ‘I shall give her the tears she shed because of you. Each one is a pearl more precious than any they find in the sea, and they’re worth more than your whole kingdom. And as a reward for looking after the geese, I shall give her my house.’

And just as the old woman said that, she vanished. The walls of the house rumbled and shook, and when the king and queen and the princess and the count looked around, they saw that it had been changed into a beautiful palace. A table had been set with a feast fit for an emperor, and there were servants bustling everywhere to do their bidding.

The story doesn’t end there. The trouble is that my grandmother, who told it to me, is losing her memory, and she’s forgotten the rest.

But I think that the beautiful princess married the count, and they remained together and lived in happiness. As for the snow-white geese, some say that they were really girls that the old woman had taken into her care, and it’s likely that they regained their human form and stayed there to serve the young queen. I wouldn’t be surprised.

As for the old woman, she can’t have been a witch, as people thought, but a wise woman who meant well. Why did she treat the young count like

that when he first came across her? Well, who knows? She might have seen into his character and found a seed or two of arrogance there. If so, she knew how to deal with it.

Finally, it's almost certain that she was present at the birth of the princess, and gave her the gift of weeping pearls instead of tears. That doesn't happen much any more. If it did, poor people would soon become rich.

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Source: 'D'Ganshiadarin', an Austrian dialect story by Andreas Schumacher (1833)
Similar stories: Katharine M. Briggs: 'Cap o' Rushes', 'Sugar and Salt' (*Folk Tales of Britain*); Italo Calvino: 'Dear as Salt', 'The Old Woman's Hide' (*Italian Folktales*); William Shakespeare: *King Lear*

This is one of the most sophisticated of all the tales. At the heart of it is the old story of the princess who told her father she loved him as much as salt, and was punished for her honesty. There are many variations on this tale, including *King Lear*.

But look what this very literary telling does. Instead of beginning with the unfortunate honest princess, it hides her until much later in the story, and begins with another figure altogether, the witch or wise woman; and not with a single event, either, but with a sketch of what she usually did, what her habitual way of life led her to do, and the reaction that aroused in others. But is she a witch, or isn't she? Fairy tales usually tell us directly; this one instead shows us what other people thought of her, and allows the question to remain equivocal, undetermined. The story-sprite here is flirting with modernism already, in which there is no voice with absolute authority, and we can have no view except one that passes through a particular pair of eyes (the father and his little son); but all human views are partial. The father might be right, or he might not.

Then we meet the count, and the events of the story begin. The old woman treats the young man with what seems like high-handed and meaningless harshness; he meets another woman younger than the first, but ugly, dull; the old woman gives him the present of a box containing something which, when the queen opens the box in the next city he visits, causes her to faint. The storyteller has given us a tale full of mystery and suspense, and still we haven't got to the heart of it.

But now, in the words of the queen (the story-sprite again, making sure that we can only know something that someone in the story knows) comes the kernel of the tale, the story of the girl who told the truth about loving her father as much as salt. She wept tears that were pearls, says the queen, and in the box there is one of those very pearls. *Now* we can see the connections that the storyteller has established between these mysterious events, and from here the tale moves swiftly on towards the climax. The goose girl takes off her skin in the moonlight (and again, we can only see this because the count is observing it) and reveals her hidden beauty; the old woman, treating her with great tenderness, tells her to put on her silk dress; the participants come together, and the truth is revealed.

And then there's another reminder of the partiality of knowledge: the storyteller says that the story doesn't end there, but the old woman who originally told it is losing her memory and has forgotten the rest. Nevertheless, it *might* happen that . . . and so on. This marvellous tale shows how complex a structure can be built on the simplest of bases, and still remain immediately comprehensible.

THE THREE SNAKE LEAVES

Once there was a poor man who couldn't support his only son any more. When the son realized this, he said, 'Father, it's no use my staying here. I'm just a burden to you. I'm going to leave home and see if I can earn a living.'

The father gave him his blessing, and they parted sorrowfully.

The king of a nearby country was a powerful ruler, and at that time he was waging war. The young man enlisted in his army and soon found himself at the front where a great battle was being fought. The bullets flew like hail, the danger was hideous, and his comrades were falling dead all around. When the general himself fell dead, the last of the troops were going to flee, but the young man took his place and yelled: 'We won't be defeated! Follow me, and God save the king!'

The men followed him as he led the charge, and they soon had the enemy on the run. When the king heard of the young man's part in the victory, he promoted him to field marshal, gave him gold and treasure, and bestowed on him the highest honours in the kingdom.

Now the king had a daughter who was very beautiful, but she had one strange obsession. She had sworn an oath not to marry any man unless he promised to let himself be buried alive with her if she died first. 'After all, if he really loves me,' she said, 'why would he want to go on living?' And she said that she would do the same and be buried with him if he was the first to die.

This grim condition had put off many young men who would otherwise have begged to marry her, but the soldier was so struck by her beauty that nothing would discourage him. So he asked the king for her hand.

'Do you know what you must promise?' said the king.

‘If she dies before me, I must go to the grave with her,’ said the soldier. ‘But I love her so much that I’m willing to risk that.’

The king consented, and the wedding was celebrated with great splendour.

For a while they lived together happily, but one day the princess fell ill. Doctors came from all over the kingdom, but none of them could help her, and presently she died. And then the young soldier remembered the promise he’d had to make, and shuddered. There was no way of getting out of it, even if he’d wanted to break the promise, because the king was going to put sentries at the grave itself and all around the cemetery in case he tried to escape. When the day came for the princess to be buried, they carried her body to the royal vault, made sure the young man was inside, and the king personally locked and bolted the door.

They had put some provisions in there: on a table there were four candles, four loaves of bread and four bottles of wine. The soldier sat there beside the princess’s body day after day, taking only a mouthful of bread and a sip of wine, making them last as long as possible. When he’d taken the last sip but one and eaten the last mouthful but one, and when the last candle was down to its last inch, he knew that his time had nearly come.

But as he sat there in despair, he saw a snake crawl out of a corner of the vault and move towards the body. Thinking it intended to eat her, the young man drew his sword. ‘While I live, you shan’t touch her!’ he said, and struck the snake three times, cutting it to pieces.

Shortly afterwards, a second snake came crawling out of the corner. It came to the body of the first snake, and looked at it, piece by piece, and then crawled away again. Soon it came back, and this time it had three green leaves in its mouth. Carefully moving the first snake’s body together again, it laid a leaf on each of the wounds, and in a moment the dead snake stirred into life, the wounds closed up, and it was whole again. The two snakes hurried away together.

But the leaves were still lying where they’d left them, and the young man thought that if their miraculous power had brought the snake back to life, it might do the same for a human being. So he picked up the leaves and laid them on the dead princess’s white face, one on her mouth and the other two on her eyes.

And as soon as he did this, her blood began to stir. A healthy pink came into her cheeks, and she drew a breath and opened her eyes.

‘God in heaven!’ she said. ‘Where am I?’

‘You’re with me, my dear wife,’ said the soldier, and told her all that had happened. He gave her the very last mouthful of bread and the very last sip of wine, and then they banged on the door and shouted so loudly that the sentries outside heard them and went running to the king.

The king came to the graveyard himself and personally unlocked and unbolted the door of the vault. The princess tumbled into his arms, he shook the young man’s hand, and everyone rejoiced at the miracle that had brought her back to life.

As for the snake leaves, the soldier was a careful man, and he told no one about how the princess had been revived. But he had an honest and reliable servant, so he gave this servant the three snake leaves to look after. ‘Take good care of them,’ he said, ‘and make sure you keep them with you wherever we go. You never know when we might need them again.’

Now after she was brought back to life, a change came over the princess. All the love she had for her husband drained away from her heart. She still pretended to love him, however, and when he suggested making a sea voyage to visit his old father, she agreed at once. ‘What a pleasure it’ll be to meet the noble father of my dearest husband!’ she said.

But once at sea she forgot the great devotion the young man had shown her, because she felt a lust growing in her for the captain of the ship. Nothing would satisfy her but to sleep with him, and soon they were lovers. One night in his arms she whispered, ‘Oh, if only my husband were dead! What a marriage we two would make!’

‘That is easily arranged,’ said the captain.

He took a length of cord and, with the princess at his side, crept into the cabin where the young man was sleeping. The princess held one end of the cord and the captain wound the other around her husband’s neck, and then they pulled so hard that, struggle as he might, he couldn’t fight them off, and soon they had strangled him.

The princess took her dead husband by the head and the captain took him by the feet, and they threw him over the ship’s rail. ‘Let’s go home now,’ said the princess. ‘I’ll tell my father that he died at sea, and I’ll sing your praises, and he’ll let us be married and you can inherit the kingdom.’

But the faithful servant had seen everything they'd done, and as soon as their backs were turned he untied a boat from the ship and rowed back in search of his master's body. He soon found it, and after hauling it into the boat he untied the cord from around the young man's neck and put the three snake leaves on his eyes and mouth, and he came back to life at once.

Then the two of them rowed with all their might. Day and night they rowed, stopping for nothing, and their boat flew over the waves so fast that they reached the shore a day before the ship, and went straight to the palace. The king was amazed to see them.

'What's happened?' he said. 'Where's my daughter?'

They told him everything, and he was shocked to hear of his daughter's treachery.

'I can't believe she'd do such a terrible thing!' he said. 'But the truth will soon come to light.'

And so it did. Very soon the ship arrived at the port, and on hearing of this the king made the young man and his servant wait in a hidden room, where they could listen to everything that was said.

The princess, dressed all in black, came sobbing to her father.

'Why have you come back alone?' he said. 'Where's your husband? And why are you wearing mourning?'

'Oh, father dear,' she said, 'I'm inconsolable! My husband took ill with the yellow fever and died. The captain and I had to bury him at sea. If he hadn't helped me, I don't know what I would have done. But the captain's such a good man – he looked after my dear husband when the fever was at its height, no matter what the danger. He can tell you all about it.'

'Oh, your husband's dead, is he?' said the king. 'Let's see if I can bring him back to life.'

And he opened the door and invited the other two to come out.

When the princess saw the young man, she fell to the ground as if she'd been struck by lightning. She tried to say that her husband must have been hallucinating in his fever, that he must have fallen into a coma so deep they mistook it for death; but the servant produced the cord, and in the face of that evidence she had to admit her guilt.

'Yes, we did it,' she sobbed, 'but please, father – show some mercy!'

'Don't speak to me of mercy,' said the king. 'Your husband was ready to die in the grave with you, and he gave you back your life, but you killed

him in his sleep. You'll get the punishment you deserve.'

And she and the captain were put on board a ship with holes drilled in the hull, and sent out over the stormy sea. Soon they sank with the ship, and were never seen again.

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Source: stories told to the Grimm brothers by Johann Friedrich Krause and the von Haxthausen family
Similar stories: Italo Calvino: 'The Captain and the General', 'The Lion's Grass' (*Italian Folktales*)

A vivid and intriguing tale, which falls into two halves, the first half being magic and the second romantic/realistic. The version in Grimm ties both halves together skilfully by means of the leaves in the title. I haven't altered it apart from the business of the young man's murder. In the original he's just thrown over the side of the ship, but in the two similar tales in Calvino the hero is executed, by firing squad in the first case and on the gallows in the second, and is thus incontrovertibly dead before being brought back to life by means of the magic leaves. I thought that the young man in this story ought to be unmistakably and dramatically killed too, hence the strangling, which also allows the servant to prove the wife's guilt by producing the cord.

But into how many pieces is the snake cut? This vital question seems to have foxed everyone, including the Grimms themselves. The text has unequivocally '*und hieb sie in drei Stücke*' – 'and cut it into three pieces' – and David Luke, Ralph Mannheim and Jack Zipes all leave that as it is in their translations of the story. Yet to do that would only take two blows of the young man's sword, and consequently there would be only two places to put the leaves, not three. We need to look at what's essential, and what's essential is the number three (the three leaves, the princess's eyes and mouth, the classic fairy-tale 'three'), so there need to be three places for the second snake to put the leaves, hence there need to be three blows of the sword, which would cut the snake not into three but into four. But to say that introduces the idea of *four* unhelpfully into the reader's or listener's mind. I think the best solution is what I've done above.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials trilogy has sold more than fifteen million copies and been published in more than forty countries. The first volume, *The Golden Compass,* was made into a major motion picture starring Nicole Kidman and Daniel Craig. Pullman is at work on a companion His Dark Materials novel, *The Book of Dust*. He lives in Oxford, England.

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